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The great Culbert rookery.

(1904)

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Rookery  
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# THE GREAT CUTHBERT ROOKERY

By HERBERT K. JOB

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

**A**BOUT fifteen years ago it was known to the plume-hunters that somewhere in the great mangrove swamp that covers the southern extremity of Florida was a large rookery, or breeding colony, of herons, egrets, and other water-birds whose plumes were in great demand in the millinery market. Hitherto all efforts to locate it had been unavailing—a fact which will surprise no one who has been even to the portals of that terrible wilder-

ness. At length, an individual named Cuthbert, with a hardihood worthy of a better cause, made a business of tracing out this mysterious rookery. Starting from the southern end of the west coast, probably somewhere in Whitewater Bay, he watched the flight of the birds, formed a conclusion as to the exact direction of their course, and plunged into the bewildering maze of the mangrove swamp.

With a light canoe and a meager outfit,



White Ibis Returning to Its Nest in the Red Mangoes.



he paddled along channels or lakes, wherever possible. When it was not, he carried canoe and outfit on his back, struggling through the tropical tangle, and sleeping among the mangrove roots when night overtook him. From time to time he climbed a tree and verified his course by that of the birds. All the time he was fighting the hordes of mosquitoes that make the life of man there almost intolerable.

How many days he was thus engaged is not known. At last he reached the tangled shore of a round, open lake about a mile and a half across. Nearly in the middle of it he saw a small island of some two acres, densely overgrown with mangrove trees, whose dark foliage was almost hidden under a canopy of snow-white birds—ibises, herons, and egrets—with others of darker plumage. Multitudes were perched upon the trees, while no less a company were coming and going. It must have been a beautiful and wonderful sight, a theme for the artist, a vision for the poet. But our plume-hunter was not of that sort; his aspirations could only be expressed in terms of dollars. Making a closer investigation, he found that the islet was crowded with thousands upon thousands of the very birds whose plumage would bring the highest prices. There they were at his mercy, the nesting-season at its height, brooding their eggs and feeding their young.

Did Cuthbert hasten to spread the joyous news among the few human inhabitants of that wilderness—Indians, hunters, and outlaws in hiding in the swamps? Not at all; the secret was locked up in his own breast, and meanwhile he was hard at work. The crack of his rifle, hardly louder than the snap of a twig, and inaudible only a few rods away, attracted the attention of not a single stray hunter. Weeks went by, and matters were very different upon the island. No bird now winged its way to the solitude, save bands of buzzards and fish crows. Swarms of flies buzzed around the thousands of nests whose only occupants were the decaying young that had starved to death. On the ground were reeking piles of the bodies of their natural protectors, each with a strip of skin and plumage torn from its back. The rookery was—as the local term of the plumers has it—“shot out.”

The buzzards were gorged and happy, and so was the brutal Cuthbert over his \$1,800—from the wholesale milliners—so the story goes.

Quite recently our guide—the game-warden—had visited the spot, and, finding that quite a colony of birds had again located there, posted game-protection notices. Naturally I was anxious to see this remarkable place, but had to let the rest of my party go there first without me, while I was recovering from the effects of drinking swamp water. After they had returned home, I took the trip alone with the guide.

To reach that rookery involves what no one but a thorough enthusiast ought to venture upon. The first stage is to push or drag a skiff a dozen miles over the “soft-soap flats,” the mud being well up to the knees—such is Barnes’ Sound near the mainland. This occupied us till midnight, with the pleasure, then, of sleeping on some boards across the thwarts of the boat, out in the rain. The second stage is sculling, pushing, chopping, and dragging the boat for seven miles through a series of channels, completely overgrown and choked up with roots and branches of the mangrove, that connects a chain of shallow lakes. The openings to these passages are entirely hidden by the jungle; it would be suicidal for a stranger to the country to attempt the trip unguided. Even after having made it once, I know I could not find the way alone, nor could I when I was at the rookery have found the way out.

It was afternoon when, pretty well tired, we saw the waters of the desired lake sparkling through the green of the blinding thicket. For a time I forgot the tormenting mosquitoes as I strained my eyes for the first glimpse of the islet. There it lay out in the lake, not altogether white with birds, yet with enough of them in evidence to verify the wonderful tales that I had heard. The tree-tops were dotted with white, and there was a constant procession of birds to and from the island.

We ate dinner out on the lake, to avoid the clouds of “skeets,” then cleared a spot for camp in the mangrove swamp on the shore nearest the island, after which we pulled for the rookery. The nearer we approached, the more birds were visible; many white, some black, and

others of intermediate shades. I sat in the stern with the Reflex camera in my lap, the slide withdrawn from a five by seven, and the focal-plane shutter set for one five-hundredth of a second. The sky was well filled with broken clouds, through which the sun shone at intervals. When the boat was within a few rods of the island, the guide thumped an oar upon the thwart, whereupon quite a cloud of white ibises rose from the nearest mangroves, giving me the desired opportunity for my first picture. This was upon the west

a great fan. One of them, surprised by the boat near its nest, appeared completely terrified, and fell to the water, along the surface of which it went beating and fluttering past us. This was on the east side of the island; on the north a great blue heron started out, and the ibises began to fly again; thus we completed the circuit. Once more around, and I had a goodly number of hopeful snapshots to my credit.

Then we landed on the northern side, running the boat up into a sort of little



Little Blue Herons in Flight.

side of the island, where most of the ibises and also egrets, seemed to be located.

We now rowed around the island south and east, keeping close to its densely overgrown shore. A few rods further, and a lot of great black Florida cormorants began springing and fluttering from the low mangroves, to fly out in bands over the lake and alight out in the water. A little further along numbers of little blue and Louisiana herons began to start up, and then, with tremendous flapping, past us would come an anhinga—the curious “snake-bird” or “water turkey” of the South—its slender, snake-like neck outstretched, and the long tail spread out like

bayou. Over us arched the tangled branches of the mangroves, which grew out into the water from the low muddy shore. Every step was attended with alarms and confusion. The trees, not over about thirty feet high anywhere, were filled with nests in almost every possible crotch. The owners scrambled away, squawking—Louisiana herons, white ibises and anhingas—at this point. Young herons seemed to be everywhere, pretty well grown, climbing and fluttering from branch to branch.

The first nest that I especially noted, close to the boat and about ten feet above the water, held four young anhingas, per-



White Ibis and Florida Cormorants Leaving Nests.

haps half grown, clad in suits of buff-colored down, with some dark feathers sprouting on the wings. It was a fine subject for the camera, and I proceeded to climb a neighboring tree. As I did so, one of the youngsters dropped headlong from the nest to the water beneath and disappeared from view; I could see it swimming off below the surface. Another climbed out among the branches; but the two others stayed and let me drive my screw-bolt into a branch and set up the camera. One of them was still enough, whereas the other little wretch kept darting out its neck at me, serpent-fashion, making it hard to secure the exposure of a second's duration necessary there in the shade. This being done, there was another brood of three, just beyond, to work upon. The mother snake-birds would fly into the network of the branches, and leave with a great fluttering as soon as they caught sight of the intruder.

A few steps then brought us to the main ibis colony, where hundreds were nesting in an area of rather low trees growing out of the water. Every movement on our part caused an uproar of croaking notes and a beating of many wings. Especially ominous to them seemed the snapping of a twig, possibly suggesting the report of the small rifle of the plume-hunter, though it may have been the mere suddenness of the sound. The ibis is a beautiful bird, snowy white, save for the black primaries and the deep carmine bill and legs. Though timid, it is not very shy, and I was glad to find that if I kept still, sheltering myself in the undergrowth, the ibises would alight quite near me. It was very hard in such a thicket to secure an unobstructed view. However, I managed to find two fairly good spots, and with the telephoto lens secured a number of ibis pictures.

All the nests of these water-birds are rude platforms of sticks in some forking branch, usually without soft lining. Although the nest of the ibises are lined with green mangrove leaves, they are the most flimsily built nest of any of the birds, and hardly do justice to the two or three beautifully mottled eggs that they contain.

Not only were there no young ibises hatched in this rookery, but the eggs were all fresh, and many of the sets incomplete.

The other kinds of birds, for the most part, had young, and it looked as though these ibises might have recently arrived here from some devastated rookery elsewhere, especially as we found the young ibises well grown in another locality.

Besides man, the fish-crows and buzzards prove troublesome and destructive. They were flying about the rookery in considerable numbers. The crows were especially tame, and would follow us about, alighting upon the nests that the ibises had just left at our approach, to eat the eggs. Some would do this on the spot, others would be seen flying off with an egg impaled upon the bill. For this reason I tried not to make more disturbance in the rookery than was absolutely necessary.

While I was among the ibises' nests, I heard a series of harsh rattling grunts, whose author I found to be an American egret, that flew back and forth over me and then alighted in a tree-top to watch. It was a most beautiful sight, the tall, slender white bird, with long graceful neck, and back loaded with elegant "aigrette" plumes which drooped down over the wings. These are the prize of the plume-hunter, and for them this beautiful species and others have been reduced to the verge of extermination. These swamps of southern Florida are about the last holding-ground of the pitiful remnant. But here was the egret's nest, about fifteen feet up a mangrove. In it were three little egrets, rather ragged and uncouth in their incipient white plumage, yet quaint and interesting. Not far away were several other nests of this species, each containing two or three young. One family of them were large enough to fly a little, and could just flutter from tree to tree and keep out of my reach. Another brood of two were at the climbing stage, but I managed to drive them back to the nest and photograph them with the Reflex camera, in the open sunlight that bathed the tops of the mangroves. The eggs of the egret are in color a light greenish blue, like most herons' eggs.

Out near the edge of the island, on the very tops of the trees, were the nests of the Florida cormorants, rather compact structures, but very dirty. Some of them held from two to four soiled whitish eggs, but in the majority there were small, naked, black young, repulsive in appearance.

They lay squirming in the nests, unable even to sit up, and suggested reptiles rather than birds. The common saying is that the cormorants are breeding every month in the year save one—but which that one was, nobody seems to know. In only one nest were the young of good size, and it was only with considerable difficulty that I could even take snapshots of them, balancing myself upon the topmost twigs of the tree, not without

some solicitude for the welfare of my neck and limbs, and for the heavy camera. There were other nests close by, and the mother cormorants were solicitous for their young, alighting near me, and allowing me some snapshots at them. They might well be anxious, for the naked young cannot bear the hot rays of the sun, and they would have died, even during my short stay, had I not covered them with leaves.

Everywhere on the island there were many nests of the little Louisiana heron. Some of them still held eggs—curiously, in this rookery almost always three, whereas last year, in central Florida, I invariably found four or five to a nest. Wherever the young herons were large enough to stand, they would usually scramble out of the nest when I tried to photograph them. It was only with much difficulty that I finally secured a picture of a whole family of young at



Half-grown American Egrets on Nest.

home. I also caught a well-grown youngster and posed him upon a branch, despite his strong inclination to leave me.

Then came an inspection of the comparatively small colony of the little blue heron along the eastern shore of the island, where they nested in the mangroves out over the water. There were usually four blue eggs in their nests, or varying numbers of young. At first these young are pure white; later some slaty-blue feathers



Young Little Blue Heron, which is White in Youth, Turning to Dark Bluish-gray in the Adult.





Young Florida Cormorants in Their Nests.

crop out; but it is not until their second year that they don the complete dark uniform of the adult. One poor little white fellow had fallen from one of the nests into the water and was clinging to a branch, nearly chilled and exhausted. I put him back into his cradle of twigs out at the end of the branches, and borrowed one of his dry and contented brothers to pose upon a more accessible branch, where he sat very sweetly for his picture. I also

only trace of them left was a single spoon-bill's egg in an ibis's nest, along with two eggs of the ibis. The ibis may have been using a deserted spoon-bill's nest.

We remained in this remote spot for parts of three days, the above being a condensed summary of our doings and observations. Occasional great blue herons and wood ibises were noted, but these were, like ourselves, merely visitors. When we rowed over in the morning from camp,



Young American Egrets in Nests—the Adult Wears the Beautiful Aigrette Plumes in Nesting Time.

secured views of the adults in flight and upon the trees, from the boat.

Upon their previous visit here, my friends had seen twelve roseate spoonbills at one time flying about, and had examined a few nests, containing either three large eggs, beautifully blotched with lilac, or the young, covered with rosy down, all of tender age. Now they were all gone, the nest having been plundered by crows or buzzards. The

a band of fish-crows remained to see what they could steal, while another flock accompanied us to the rookery to rob the nests. How we longed to wring their black necks! At evening a flock of six of the rare everglade kite, probably a family party, would repair to the rookery—doubtless from the everglade marshes only a few miles further inland—and soar over the island. I secured a rather faint snapshot photograph, taken



Young Anhingas, or Snake-like Birds, in Nest.

after sunset, of the sextette soaring. It is impossible to estimate with anything like accuracy the census of such a rookery. One of the party thought there were some eight thousand birds. There may have been that many, or only half the number. The Louisiana herons were the most numerous, and may have had one thousand nests or more. Next would come the ibises with some six hundred. Reckoning that the cormorants had one hundred and fifty, anhingas one hundred, little blue herons eighty, and the egrets about twenty, the whole would count up approximately about two thousand nests, or four thousand birds. This is a very moderate estimate; the actual number may easily have been much greater.

Our stay at this remarkable place was a constant succession of wonders and delights to the spirit, but of miseries to the flesh. The mosquitoes were there in numbers beyond relief, and made life a burden. Photographing was torture, and

worst of all was the changing and packing of plates at night, out in the open air. So thick were the insects that I could hardly lay a plate in the box without mashing some of them under it on the film. We slept among the mangrove roots, with no cover but our blankets and the mosquito net of cheese-cloth, without which last a man could not live. One of the nights was showery, and as I lay there with the guide, many miles from another human being, feeling the rain spattering in my face, and listening to the roaring hum of the insect scourge outside—alas, and *inside*—the net, and the occasional scream of some wild animal in the swamp, I almost wished that I was out of the wilderness. On the third day the guide felt ill, and, after a morning's work, we started back, reaching headquarters about midnight. The Cape Sable region is a tough proposition. But think of staying on a two-acre island in a wilderness lake with thousands of splendid birds!

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